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ABSTRACT

A discussion of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) focuses on principles and techniques for the development of one form of communicative competence, i.e., sociolinguistic competence. First, the concept of sociolinguistic competence is explained, drawing on research in this area. Sources of problems in development of second language sociolinguistic competence, particularly for Japanese students of ESL, are then discussed. These problems include: transfer of sociocultural patterns from Japanese to English; lack of linguistic control, especially for less direct expressions important to politeness in English (e.g., "I wonder if you would..."); stereotypes about English speakers' directness as it relates to politeness; and lack of explicit presentation of politeness issues in textbooks. Several techniques for teaching appropriate use of language for different functions are presented, including use of parallel expressions in Japanese and English, contrasting Japanese and English realizations of the same function, and role playing that manipulates four situational factors influencing appropriate use of expressions (interlocutors, place, time, and topic or activity). Contains 27 references. (MSE)

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# Communicative Competence in English: Teaching about Functions

S. Kathleen Kitao

## The Concept of Competence

The role that competence, as opposed to performance, plays in language use was first discussed by Chomsky (1965). However, Chomsky's conceptualization of competence dealt only with grammatical competence, that is, the knowledge that native speakers of a language have about what is grammatically acceptable in their language and their ability to generate an infinite number of sentences based on their knowledge of the rules of grammar.

Hymes (1972, 1974) expanded on Chomsky's concept of competence, using the term "communicative competence" to describe the ability not only to apply the rules of grammar correctly but to use utterances appropriately. He referred to the "rules of use" or "rules of speaking," without which knowledge of grammatical rules would be worthless. Children, Hymes wrote, need to learn more than what may possibly be said in order to function effectively as members of a community. They need to learn what should and should not be said in a given situation. In fact, a person who knew what could conceivably be said in a language but had no idea of what should and should not be said would be a "social monster."

As Wolfson (1989) pointed out, Hymes did not intend to propose a dichotomy between grammatical and communicative competence. Rather he intended to focus on the fact that a discussion of language needs to include both an awareness of grammatical forms and of their appropriate use.

Other theorists have expanded on Hymes' ideas of communicative competence. The term "register" is used to denote the concept that speakers or writers modify their utterances based on the situation in which they are communicating. This modification can be based on the formality of the situation, the identities of the other people involved, and so on (Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens, 1970). Other aspects of communicative competence include the ability to use repair strategies (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974) and the ability to perform functions (e.g., apologies, promises, requests) with language (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

*Types of Competence*

Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a framework of communicative competence. They divided competence into four areas.

1) Grammatical competence. This area includes the ability to comprehend and manipulate vocabulary, the rules of word formation and combination, pronunciation, spelling, etc.
2) Sociolinguistic competence. This area includes the ability to produce and comprehend appropriate utterances, based on the situation, the people involved in the communication, etc.
3) Discourse competence. Discourse competence is the ability to combine grammatical forms into a unified spoken or written text appropriate to the situation and purpose.
4) Strategic competence. This refers to the ability to use com-

munication strategies to achieve goals, compensate for breakdowns of communication, etc.

While factor analysis has thus far failed to isolate these factors in English language learners, the framework is still a useful basis for pedagogical proposals (Ellis, 1991). It allows language teachers to consider these facets of language and how they can be addressed in the classroom.

For the purpose of this paper, I am interested primarily in the area of sociolinguistic competence, particularly in the appropriate use of functions in English.

## Sociolinguistic Competence

*The First Language*

Piaget (1970) and other theorists have argued that at the age of 4 or 5, children are not aware of variations in sociocultural appropriateness. Around the age of 8 or 10, children gradually develop a sense of sociocultural awareness. Younger children, according to this view, are too egocentric to function as social beings and so have little awareness of notions of appropriateness and do not take into account listener characteristics in planning their speech.

A small but growing body of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic research, however, contradicts this assertion (Anderson, 1990). Anderson argues that by the time they reach 4 or 5 years of age, children have been exposed to a wide variety of different speech settings—the doctor's office, the preschool, birthday parties, the grocery store, etc.

Anderson did a study of children between 4 and 7 years of age using puppets to role play various situations. She found that children as young as 4 years old were sensitive "to the fact that utterances can ex-

press a whole range of social information tied to status (age, sex, and occupation) and to familiarity of speaker and addressee. . . ." (p. 15)

The children's demonstration of sociolinguistic knowledge was most striking in the area of directives (requests, commands, etc.). As Anderson points out, because of the demands that directives make on the hearer, and because of the wide variety of realizations available for directives, the choice of directive type can provide a great deal of information about the context and relative status, familiarity, etc., of the speaker and hearer. Anderson's results indicated that, although the children became more sophisticated in their use of directives as they grew older, by age 4 they used the same range of directive types that adults use. The children that Anderson observed systematically modified the directives that they used, based on the social context and the people involved. Thus from a very early age, native English speakers show an awareness of and sensitivity to sociolinguistic expectations in different situations.

It is not yet clear how children gain sociolinguistic competence in their first language (Anderson, 1990). While parents and teachers might do some explicit teaching, it seems intuitively obvious that children must learn most of what they know about the sociolinguistic rules of their language through observation in a wide variety of situations.

*The Second Language*

Many speakers of English as a second or foreign language, though they may speak it fluently and even idiomatically, have difficulty with sociolinguistic aspects of language. Linguistic and sociolinguistic competence might even be thought of as being independent. A speaker might produce an utterance which is perfectly grammatical but inappropriate in context or which contains grammatical errors but which is appropriate

(Ellis, 1991). In the former case, a second/foreign language speaker may come across to native speakers, especially those not accustomed to communicating with non-native speakers, as rude, slow, or difficult (Chen, Linnell, Porter, and Stone, 1992). In fact, in their study of the appropriate use of apologies, Chen, Linnell, Porter, and Stone did not find correlations between linguistic proficiency, as measured by TOEFL scores, and the ability to supply appropriate apologies.

*Studies of Second Language Sociolinguistic Competence.* There is a growing body of research on the sociolinguistic competence of second/foreign language learners, especially as it related to their use of functions in the target language. These studies indicate that sociolinguistic competence is a source of difficulty for second/foreign language learners, one that is often ignored in language curricula.

In a study of 20 non-native English speakers from mixed language backgrounds and 20 native speakers, Chen, Linnell, Porter, and Stone (1992) found that the non-native speakers significantly undersupplied explicit apologies and acknowledgement of their need to apologize in some situations.

Kasper (1984) and Richards (1980) found that non-native speakers in their second language tended to take utterances too literally, not recognizing the intended function. They found that non-fluent non native speakers tended to pay too much attention to the surface meaning of utterances, the form rather than the function.

Fukushima and Iwata (1985) did a study comparing role plays of an invitation and two requests, using American native English speakers and advanced Japanes students of English in Japan. Their results indicated that, compared to the Americans, the Japanese participants were more direct and did not differentiate between situations where directness was

appropriate and situations where politeness required indirectness. The researchers concluded that the Japanese participants were not able to manipulate the language proficiently, although they were aware that different situations require different levels of politeness.

In a study of refusals in English and Japanese, Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) found that in making refusals, Japanese speakers of English tended to use elements and content in their refusals more similar to Japanese speakers of Japanese than American speakers of English.

In a review of studies on sociolinguistic competence of Japanese speakers of English, Ellis (1991), though he warned against putting too much weight on stereotypes, summarized the findings of the studies by concluding that Japanese speakers tended to:

1) be more direct than English speakers in some situations, especially when speaking to a person of lower status, and less direct than Americans in others,
2) lack the politeness strategies needed to perform such functions as requests and invitations,
3) be less explicit in giving reasons for refusing, and
4) vary use of expressions more due to differences in status between people rather than to differences in familiarity, as native English speakers (Americans and Australians in the studies cited) tended to do. That is, the English speakers tended to be more polite to unfamiliar people, regardless of their relative status, while the Japanese people tended to be more polite to people of higher status and less polite to people of lower status, regardless of their familiarity.

*Sources of Problems with Second Language Sociolinguistic Competence*

The problems that Japanese speakers of English displayed with sociolinguistic competence seem to stem from three sources (Tanaka, 1988).

*Transfer.* The first source is the transfer of sociocultural patterns from Japanese to English. Often lacking knowledge of sociolinguistic appropriateness in English, they substitute what they would do in Japanese. (This may be a partly unconscious process—sociolinguistic appropriateness sometimes seems so natural that it is easy to assume that it is universal.) If the sociolinguistic expectations are similar, this is a useful strategy, but of course there are many situations in which they are not. A number of studies indicate that there is transfer of sociolinguistic knowledge from the native language to the target language (Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz, 1990), though speakers living in the United States evidenced less transfer than those living in Japan (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987). That is, research indicates that second language speakers draw on knowledge of how a function is performed in their first language in order to perform it in their target language. However, as they experience natural interaction, they seem to learn more about how the function is performed appropriately in the target language and thus depend less on transfer.

Richards and Sukwiwat (1985) identified four aspects of noncorrespondence between L1 and L2 that might result in problems with transfer. They were:

1) Differences in social situations. There may be social situations in one culture that do not exist or are very rare in the other culture. For example, Japanese people rarely if ever entertain guests other than relatives in their homes, while

Americans commonly do. Japanese may have difficulties because they are not familiar with the situation.

2) Same situation, different routine. Americans usually acknowledge a compliment with an expression of appreciation, but Japanese usually reject the compliment.

3) Same routine, different function. In Japanese, sometimes appreciation is expressed with the equivalent of "I'm sorry," which is not used to express appreciation in English.

4) Correct routine, wrong situation. A speaker might generalize an expression to a situation that it is not intended to be used in. For example, "Nice to meet you," is used only for a first meeting, not at subsequent meetings.

*Lack of linguistic control.* A second source of problems is a lack of linguistic control (Tanaka, 1988). This seems to be particularly true for the less direct expressions which are important to politeness in English (Tanaka, 1988; Fukushima and Iwata, 1985), such as, "I was wondering if you would..." as a request. If Japanese speakers of English are too direct in English, it is likely to be at least partly because they do not control the expressions that they need to be able to use rather than that they are not aware of differences in the politeness requirements of different situations. Even if they are aware of these expressions, they have probably not had enough opportunity to practice their use in conversation.

*Stereotypes about English speakers' directness.* A third problem is the stereotypes that many Japanese people have about English speakers as being direct and egalitarian. Compared to Japanese speakers, English speakers are comparatively straightforward, and the politeness system in English is not as structured grammatically as the one in Japanese. This may lead to the misconception that politeness and indirectness are not

necessary and that Americans are direct in every situation (Ellis, 1991). Therefore, Japanese speakers of English may not recognize the ways in which politeness is encoded in English.

*Presentation in textbooks.* Politeness in general and functions in particular are not dealt with in Japanese junior high or high school classrooms (Ellis, 1991; LoCastro, 1993). In a review of junior high and high school textbooks, LoCastro found that politeness is not dealt with explicitly at all, in part because the Course of Study of the Ministry of Education does not mandate it. If polite expressions occur in textbooks, they are only dealt with in passing, not as a point of teaching.

One particular area of difficulty that LoCastro (1993) pointed out, which was also studied by Altman (1990), was that of giving advice or making suggestions. In the textbooks that LoCastro reviewed, "had better" was translated into Japanese as ". . . no hoo ga ii desu." The Japanese expression is probably closer to the English expression "It would be better if you would. . . ," a relatively weak suggestion. The translation used in the textbooks gives the impression that "had better" is a weak form of suggestion, when in fact it is strong. In Altman's study, native English speakers and non native speakers of mixed first language backgrounds (including some Japanese speakers) ranked "must," "have to," "'d better," "should," "BE supposed to," "can," and "could" according to how strong they were perceived to be. The main difference was that the native English speakers ranked "'d better" as being relatively strong, third behind "must" and "have to," but the non native speakers ranked it as the weakest expression.

## Teaching about Functions in the Language Classroom

Sounding exactly like a native English speaker is not necessarily a realistic or even desirable goal for Japanese speakers of English. However, when Japanese speakers violate sociolinguistic rules, they may appear pushy, cold, or rude, far from the image that they would wish to present or think that they are presenting. Therefore, it is useful for Japanese speakers of English to be aware of sociolinguistic appropriateness in English (Tanaka, 1988).

The most basic issue that students need to understand is that form does not always equal function (Ervin Tripp, 1976). For example, "Can you open the window?" might be a questions about ability, a request, or a suggestion. Without understanding this, students cannot use expressions for functions appropriately. It is useful therefore to introduce the students to the idea that form and function are not always the same, for example, by showing them dialogues using the same form for different functions and using the same function with different forms.

*Making Use of Students' First Language*

There is some disagreement on whether the use of students' knowledge of the sociolinguistic system of their first language is helpful to students in becoming sociolinguistically competent in the second language. Methods such as the audio-lingual method specifically prohibit drawing comparisons or contrasts with the students' native language(s). However, some more recent approaches encourage such use (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983).

In my experience teaching about functions, I have found that using

examples from Japanese, either to point out contrasts or to help students see parallels, is useful. Pointing out parallels with Japanese for, for example, how speakers decide how polite to make a request, seems to help students understand the concept in a way that just trying to explain the principles for English does not. Obviously, though, the point must be made that sociological appropriateness is not always parallel.

> As Holmes and Brown (1976) wrote, the adolescent or adult second language learner is by no means sociolinguistically naive since he has already acquired the complex sociolinguistic system used in his native speech community. In learning how to use and interpret the sociolinguistic rules of English he must develop an awareness of areas where the sociolinguistic system of his native language differs from that of English and where 'misinterpretation and misanalysis' is most likely to occur.... Adult students bring to second language learning an ability to introspect which can be extremely valuable.... The learner's sociolinguistic competence in his native language can be regarded as an asset rather than a liability, in that it facilitates the contrastive analysis of different sociolinguistic systems in the classroom (Holmes and Brown, 1976 : 424-426).

Holmes and Brown (1976) developed a program to develop sociolinguistic competence in English. They made use of various activities, including pairing situations with utterances that would be appropriate, providing appropriate utterances for various situations, and role playing. In all the activities they used, they contrasted expressions in the students' own culture with those used in English.

The authors reported that as the course progressed, students became

more aware of differences between locutionary and illocutionary force in their exchanges with native English speakers.

I have often found it useful, as Holmes and Brown advocate, to help students find parallels between Japanese and English. This process seems to help students recognize the similarities between what they do in Japanese and what they should be doing in English.

For example, in deciding how polite to make a request, three factors, in both English and Japanese, are the size of the request (that is, the amount of money, time or effort it would involve on the part of the hearer), the relative status of the speaker and the hearer, and the familiarity of the speaker and the hearer (Minami, 1987). If students think about how they make requests in Japanese, perhaps with some questions to guide them (Are you more polite in making a request of your teacher or of your friend? Why?), it helps them understand this concept.

Using Japanese students' knowledge of their own sociolinguistic system is also helpful to point out the limitations of drawing parallels between the two languages. For example, Americans put more emphasis on the size of the request in deciding how polite to make the request, but Japanese put more emphasis on the status of the hearer (Minami, 1987).

*Contrasting Expressions and Dialogues*

Ellis (1991) advocates that, at a minimum, students should have their consciousness raised about sociolinguistic factors in communication in English. This should include knowledge of some basic formulas used in functions in English and some awareness of issues related to appropriateness. Because the situation in which Japanese students learn English, especially at the junior high and high school levels, does not allow for any extensive practice, sometimes the best a teacher can do is to make

students aware of the issues involved. Ellis gives two examples of this, an exercise where students are asked to supply a refusal of an invitation and then compare their response to an example and one where they make inappropriate refusals in dialogues more polite.

I have also found it useful to have students contrast different realizations of the same function. For example, students might be asked to compare expressions like "You're careless about details sometimes," and "I'm afraid we're all careless about details sometimes," used in a conversation between a supervisor and an employee after the employee has made a mistake. The first expression is a direct complaint about the employee's performance. The second is a generalization, but in this context, the employee would understand it as a complaint about his/her performance. Being able to see the contrast between these two expressions makes this point about realizations of complaints clearly. The teacher can use this example to point out that in English, complaints are often expressed through generalizations. It is a way of making the complaint more polite and less offensive, since it does not refer directly to the person being complained of. Recognizing this will help students both recognize complaints that are directed at them and help them complain without being unnecessarily offensive.

In addition to comparing isolated utterances, it is also useful to compare dialogues in order to point out sociolinguistic problems in communication between English speakers and Japanese speakers (e.g., Kitao and Kitao, 1991). In the first dialogue, there might be problems, for example, with refusing an invitation too directly and without giving a reason. This demonstrates problems that a Japanese speaker might make in English and the reactions that an English speaker might have. In the second dialogue, the Japanese speaker could refuse the invitation appro-

priately. Comparing these two dialogues helps students recognize sociolinguistic problems in context and learn useful expressions for different situations.

*Role Plays*

Role playing is often recommended to allow students to practice what they have learned and to help them move from having a knowledge of sociolinguistic appropriateness to being able to use what they know in a conversation. However, Japanese students may lack the proficiency to improvise role plays or simulations, especially when they are "performing" in front of the class. One alternative is to have students in pairs or groups plan or write out dialogues. In addition to giving students time to prepare, this gives the teacher an opportunity to help the groups or pairs of students individually before the dialogues are performed in front of the class. The teacher can also make note of types of problems with usage that occur frequently and discuss them with the class as a whole.

For more proficient classes, one group or pair of students might be assigned a role in a dialogue, with another pair or group assigned the other role. For example, one group would have the role of a student inviting a professor to a party. Another group would have the role of the professor who already has other plans for the night of the party. In preparation, the group members discuss what expressions are necessary and appropriate and then a representative of each group participates in the role play, consulting their group as necessary. To help students see how different expressions would be appropriate in different situations, another pair of groups could be assigned a similar situation, for example, inviting a friend to a party. This helps students to develop and use a broader repertoire of expressions and to see how they are appropriate in

different situations.

Because of the strong influence of context on the expressions chosen to preform functions, it is important to present functions and expressions in context (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). Finocchiaro and Brumfit discussed the relationship between functions and the way that the speaker realizes the function, that is, the expression he/she chooses to carry out the function. For example, if a speaker wants to make a request in English, he/she has to choose among the expressions, "Do this," "Please do this," "I want you to do this," "I'd like you to do this," "Can you do this," "Could you do this," "I'd appreciate it if you would do this," "I wonder if you would mind doing this," etc. Finocchiaro and Brumfit proposed four factors in the situation that influence the choice of the expression that the speaker used to realize a function. The four factors are:

1) Persons. This factor includes the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, their relative ages and statuses, their social roles, and so on.

2) The place. This factor is the setting of the communication, whether it takes place in, for example, an office, a classroom, or a home.

3) The time. This includes such elements as whether the function occurs frequently or rarely and how long the communication is.

4) The topic or activity. This includes not only the function but its purpose. An invitation to dinner from a friend, for instance, is different from an invitation to the boss's office to discuss problems at work.

In presenting functions, organizing role plays, etc., these need to be taken into account.

## Conclusion

It is obvious that development of grammatical competence is inadequate for communication in a second language. It is also necessary to develop sociolinguistic competence, to learn what expressions are appropriate in what situations.

In addition to recognizing the necessity of making sociolinguistic competence a component of language programs, it is necessary to do more research on questions related to developing sociolinguistic competence. In what particular areas do Japanese speakers of English have problems? What are the causes of these problems? When, in relation to the development of grammatical competence, is it best to deal with sociolinguistic competence? What are the most effective ways of developing it? How can native language sociolinguistic competence be best used? Answers to these and other questions will be of use to classroom teachers.

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